

Chicago Tribune

Sketch comedy festival builds up bit by bit

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Special to the Tribune

Published January 10, 2007

Enter the Theatre Building this week, where that rollicking entertainment known as the Chicago Sketch Comedy Festival continues through Sunday, and you will be greeted by a sign that spells out the fest's nickname -- SketchFest -- in cans of Red Bull. The event (which kicked off last Thursday) demands endurance. With more than 100 groups booked, it should.

Now in its sixth year, this festival of scripted satirical vignettes is hyper-concentrated and egalitarian. What you'll find are a lot of hardworking comedians of varying skill and talent, and if there is a single trend to emerge so far, it is that Chicagoans are out-sketching their colleagues from parts outside Illinois.

Opening weekend, many of the groups I saw wisely curbed their multimedia urges (YouTube-ing can stop a show in its tracks) but played close attention to the subtle but important details that create a complete show -- developing an audience experience that is more cohesive than a random handful of scenes strung together for laughs. I'm talking about you, Canadian Content, a group out of Vancouver that has potential.

To be fair, the lineup this weekend features at least two non-Chicago groups with serious advance buzz: New York's Elephant Larry and San Francisco's Kasper Hauser. But it certainly strokes the hometown ego to see Chicagoans doing it best. What is unique to the festival itself is the palpable anticipation that jams the theater's lobby between shows, along with several hundred audience members and performers.

There is a reason most people buy an all-night pass. This is a talky, sociable crowd -- the MySpace of theatergoing. People you've never met will lean across rows of seats to ask what show you've just seen. The line to the restroom becomes an ad hoc schedule-planning session.

Ultimately, there are no guarantees; you pick a show and hope for the best. More than once, I found myself sitting through a perfectly average performance trying to shake off the feeling that something better was going on elsewhere. Such are the whims of the sketch gods.

Arrive early, but expect delays. Last weekend, the later slots started 20 minutes later than advertised, and the sly video intros got chucked. Too bad -- they were entertaining with their swipes at "egotistical actors; that is, all actors" and offered handy advice on how to bed a sketch comedian: "Hey, I really liked your show. Wanna get outta here?"

Best Chicago group of the future: Even a truncated version of **Sketchcore's** show from the fall ("**Deep Inside Your Box**") knocked it out of the park, largely because the group understands how to create a seamless universe for their non-sequiturs, including the declaration: "Rainbows aren't just for gay

people. I'm taking back rainbows" -- which led into a truly hilarious Public Enemy-style rap about the manliness of rainbows: "Roy G. Biv is how we live." Yeah, boyeee.

Best regional comedy: What Vancouver's Canadian Content lacked in purpose and pacing, it made up for with its pointedly Canadian perspective: A spelling bee participant is informed that "colour" is "the correct and only way to spell that word." It's always good to see nationalistic pride derived from the dumbest things (such as "colour" versus "color") mocked as if it really means something.

Most in need of a director: The droll performances by the three men of 25th Century Heroes (out of L.A.) couldn't mask the awkward extended blackouts that separated each scene. On the plus side, the group offered the most overtly political take on our current war on terror, reimagined as a war on bear attacks, where punishment will be "swift, harsh and Constitutional." Nice.

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The 2007 Chicago Sketch Comedy Festival runs through Sunday at Theatre Building Chicago, 1225 W. Belmont Ave. There are multiple shows per night. For tickets and a full schedule, go to www.chicagosketchfest.com or call 773-327-5252.